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The Einstein Cross
An Autobiography
by Oscar Berendsohn

Introduction

"Per Aspera ad Astra"

You will call me a dreamer, a fool perhaps, for some of what I will say and for some of what I have done. I will answer to the first that no man can exceed his dreams or succeed without them, and to the latter that having inherited the frailties of humanity all of us are fools at some time or other in our lives whether we know it or not.

I was raised on an island in a small village outside of Hamburg, in the North of Germany. "Per Aspera ad Astra" was a Latin inscription on the paddle housing of an old side-wheeler ferry which carried me daily to school. It translates to: "Through Toil to the Stars". I have chosen it as my leitmotif, my guiding principle, because the ideals it conveys has more than anything else shaped my life, as you will see.

My early years have seen their share of adventure, excitement, and trials. I grew up on the waterfront, on a shipyard which my father owned. Ships were my playground and sailors my childhood friends. Almost from the day I learned to walk, I spent much of my time on ships and the river flowing past our home. It was a happy life with a good deal of danger and excitement, far more than most children ever experience.

All this came to an end when the Nazis took over Germany. My father's parents were Jewish, something I had not been aware of until the first boycott of our shipyard by a stormtrooper.

Over the next few years I watched with a growing sense

of fear,desperation,and futility how we were slowly but surely crushed by the mindless hatred and persecution of the Nazi government until in the end we had no other choice,but to flee for our lives,and seek an uncertain future in Honduras where we spent much of the next two years in a most primitive life far off the path of civilization.At that we were fortunate.

In August of 1940,we were finally able to come to the United States to begin a new life here.For myself,it meant going to work full time in a sweatshop at age sixteen.

The hard times which followed did not particularly bother me.I was young and strong.But it prevented me for a long time to come from pursuing my dream of becoming a scientist or engineer.

Time and time again there were obstacles,some of my own making,some due to circumstances beyond my control which came between myself and the education I so desperately wanted.

Eventually,I succeeded.My biography will take you from a sweatshop in Brooklyn to a farm on the backroad of a small town in Upstate New York to the devilish heat of a summer day in a foundry.

In the end,I was rescued by my service in the United States Army during the Korean War.Its veteran benefits allowed me to enroll in the college of my choice,the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn.

Four years later,I graduated with a bachelor of science degree.It was the magic key which opened the door which

had been previously closed to me. A new world now opened up.

I had always been captivated by the science fiction of Jules Verne, and none more so than his tales of the exploration of space. Until the arrival of "Sputnik" all of these stories were indeed nothing more than fiction, perhaps to be realized in a thousand years, but that all changed on that October day in 1957.

From that day on, I tried to become part of our effort to explore the near infinite of outer space. It was not as difficult as I had anticipated. I had the right training. As part of my work for the aerospace company Sperry, I had gained much insight into reliability and failure mechanisms of all sorts of system components, and this type of skill was in high demand then mainly because few people had experience to the degree required for space where, at least then, no repairs were possible. Every single part had to work perfectly or the entire satellite was lost.

It all seems commonplace now, but then it was not. We were among the pioneers in our business.

Over the coming decades, I worked on the Apollo program, then on a highly classified system, and last and best of all, the "Hubble" space telescope followed by the "Chandra" x-ray telescope.

When I finally retired, my career had spanned everything an engineer could ask for and also, one time, the failure of the Hubble mirror, something those of us who worked on the telescope

for twelve years would rather forget. I have devoted a chapter to this unfortunate affair to try to help in the understanding of this mishap so that similar incidents do not have to happen again. Unlike the official investigation which concentrated on the technical aspects, I believe I have shown that the true reason was not mistakes of individuals, but rather a lack of proper organization.

My choice of the title "The Einstein Cross", does not reflect the cross-over from Jewish to Christian faith in my family. It refers instead to a remarkable discovery.

One of the first observations made by the Hubble telescope found the multiple image of a quasar from the very edge of the universe. This image was the result of enormously powerful gravitational fields through which the light had passed before reflecting off the surface of our primary mirror.

The image was in the shape of a cross, and hence the name given to this extraordinary phenomenon.

The title also reminds me of the two great forces, the spiritual and the physical which control, shape, and illuminate our destiny both as an individual and as the human race.

Chapter 1

Crystal Clear

I woke up with a start. Instantly, I sensed that something was dreadfully wrong. Then I heard the voice coming from our livingroom. It was strident, frigid, contemptuous:

"Jude Berendsohn, Papiere her!"

Light fell through a gap in my bedroom door. I peeked through it. Two strangers were standing there close to my father, who was trying to open his large safe where he kept his passport and valuables. I had not heard them come in. They were dressed unobtrusively in dark suits covered by an overcoat, nothing in their appearance to distinguish them from any other German you might casually pass on the street, but nobody had to tell me who or what they were: Gestapo!

A chill went through me, colder than the iciest winter day. A nightmare had become reality. That dreaded knock on the door in the middle of the night. They had come to take Dad away. There could be no doubt as to the purpose of this visit. I looked at my alarmclock glowing dim by my bedside. It was shortly past 2:00 o'clock in the morning.

The day before had been tense for all of us. The newspapers and radio broadcasts had lashed out all day long against the heinous crime committed by the Jew Grynspan, who had conspired with the Zionists to murder von Neumann, an official at the German embassy in Paris. No, this was not any ordinary killing, but a crime against the German people. It required swift retribution!

And vengeance had come during that night in November of

1938, the infamous "Kristall Nacht". I had been listening to Radio London. It was the only friendly voice on the air then, but of course, it was a violation to listen to any foreign station. Our minds might become muddled by all these lies.

Suddenly, I heard muffled voices outside, followed by the sounds of breaking glass. A major traffic accident must have occurred nearby.

Our apartment in the Klosterallee of Hamburg was close to a shopping district. I grabbed my coat and ran outside toward the noise. A large crowd had gathered in front of a clothing store. The plateglass window had been broken. A noisy mob was inside the store smashing equipment, and looting coats and other clothing. A roar of laughter went up as a man grabbed a mannequin and put on its hat. He doffed it to the crowd outside, took a deep bow, and threw the mannequin into the remains of the window. Shards of glass came splintering onto the sidewalk.

The scene before me was unreal, unfathomable, nothing less than a riot of some kind. What on earth was going on? It seemed that these people had simply gone mad. Where was the police?

"What has happened?" I asked a man standing there his arms folded across his chest.

"Judenwirtschaft, hau ab, geht dich nichts an!" he barked at me.

I stepped back to the far side of the street and watched. A man came running toward the store his hands flailing in the

air.

"Stop,stop,Hilfe,Polizei!"he shouted,but there was no police, none appeared, and nobody in the crowd moved to help him.He disappeared into the entrance of the store.A minute later, I saw him again in the wrecked display window trying to stop a man from looting.

"Diebe,Diebe,Polizei!"he shouted desperately.A scuffle broke out as he tried to stop the looter.It was not much of a contest.

Somebody in the mob hit him over the head with a crowbar. He tumbled out of the store window and collapsed on the sidewalk next to the mannequin.Blood ran down his face.He moaned,his hands moved across his head.Then he lay still and silent,an arm with a bloody hand flung across the mannequin.They made a grotesque couple.

A small moving van pulled up to the store.Two fellows got out and opened the back.With deliberate pace some men among the mob began to load the looted goods into the truck,but then a struggle ensued between two of them over a woman's overcoat.

"Hey,Franz.Den will ich fuer meinen Engel!"one of them shouted.But Franz would not let go.A sleeve was torn off.A curse went up:"Du dummer Idiot!" The coat was flung aside.

The scene was sickening.It reminded me of animals fighting over the remains of a carcass.A little while later the truck drove off,but the looting continued.

When there was nothing more to take or smash,the mob left.

The crowd on the sidewalk including myself took that as our cue and dispersed. Just as we were leaving, I could hear the approaching wail of police sirens. The sentinels of law and order were about to make their appearance. We had nothing to worry. All was well!

After my return home from this horrible affair, it had taken me a long time to fall asleep. I kept seeing the body of the stranger lying amid the wreckage of his store, his arm draped across the stripped mannequin.

My father up to now had always maintained that the worst had already been done to us by the Nazis. What more could they possibly do? He was about to find out!

I watched the two Gestapo agents as they leafed through the documents my dad had retrieved from the safe. From their hasty manner, I sensed that this would not be the only housecall they would make this night. They were in a hurry.

"Militaer Papiere!" the shorter one of the two snapped. He seemed to be in charge. My father standing there in his nightshirt his hands trembling cut a pathetic figure. He hesitated for a few seconds before understanding what it was they wanted: His military discharge papers from World War I.

"Schnell du Schafskopf!" he was dressed down.

I watched Dad fumble around inside his safe before handing one set of documents each to the two men. There was something loose inside each document. The two men slipped it out and pocketed it. Then they handed the papers back to Dad.

For a few seconds the short man mustered my father up and down as if he had to make up his mind about something.

"Du hast drei Monate zu verschwinden,hoerst du,"he said finally."Sonst verschwindest du im KZ."

My father said nothing.What could he say?He had been given three month to get out of Germany or disappear in a concentration camp.At that,he was lucky,luckier than many others.But it had not been only luck.

The two men left as quietly as they had come,shadows of a very dark night which had descended over my native land.

In the morning we learned the extent of the terror campaign which had been carried out during that night.Any Jew between eighteen and sixty years,not on his way out of Germany,was arrested and detained until he could obtain an exit visa.Many were sent to concentration camps,others such as the owner of the store were killed by the rampaging mobs.All across Germany,stores,factories,synagogues,and homes of Jews were systematically vandalized,burned,looted,and destroyed.

The radio and newspapers were full of the "righteous indignation which the German people had justly expressed during the night."

In the morning when the family had breakfast,my father sat silent at first.Then he suddenly blurted out:"Es hilft nichts,wir muessen raus!"

Since I had overheard the orders of the Gestapo I said nothing.In many ways I was glad.The oppression we had suffered

since 1933 when the Nazis had come to power had made me desperate to leave a long time ago.

"I am glad you finally decided to leave,"my mother said."We should have in 1935 when they enacted the Nuernberg laws.Ever since it has gone from bad to terrible.They treat you as if you were vermin of some kind and your children not much better. For my part I would rather go today than tomorrow.The Nazis are not people,they are monsters."

"How did you manage to avoid being arrested?"she continued.
"You are not 61 years old.Why did they let you go?"

My father's face flushed a little."I bribed them,"he said awkwardly."A thousand Marks (250 Dollars) each."

"Are you serious?"my mother said with an incredulous face.
"I don't believe it.You took a terrible chance!"

"There was a lot of money in the safe,"my dad replied."I saw the greed in their faces when they spotted it while I handed them the papers.It was a small price to pay to stay out of the KZ."

"They have made it very clear to me that we have to get out of Germany.We have three months.I am going to the American Consulate this morning about a visa for us."

I felt a great relief.Finally,we would be leaving this land whose government had turned against its own citizens.The jaws of the Nazi program had tightened on us for so long that by now I had expected that things would only get worse,but that had not made it any easier to bear.

In the afternoon,after I had returned from school,I asked my mother when we would get a visa to emigrate to the United States.

She shook her head.I could see from her face that things had gone badly.

"I don't know what will become of us,"she said in a low voice."There were so many desperate people at the consulate,it took your father most of the day just to speak to one of the officials.

He was told there is such a long waiting list,it will take at least two years to get the visas;and we still need a sponsor before they will even consider us.Dad has cabled his cousin Eddy in Brooklyn,but it all takes time.We don't have it."

I had never seen her so sad and discouraged.How could all this possibly come about?Was this the same country where I had been born and raised close to the waterfront?Where I had been privileged to a wonderful childhood close to the river flowing past our home.The country where my ancestors had lived for generation upon generation.I had always considered myself a part of this country,a German and proud of it.Now I was an outcast.

The most difficult fact to accept was that with very few exceptions all the people I had come in contact with had been nothing but kind to me.But now their government had turned against me and my family.How could this happen?What had we done to deserve this fate?

I was fourteen years old, too young to understand the blind hatred and intolerance which some people carry in their hearts against their fellow man, but now I knew the consequences. This whole tragedy which was unfolding before my eyes seemed so unreal, preposterous, insane. How had it all begun and led to this terrible state? And more to the point how would it all end? I feared the worst.

We had been a happy family, a large family. My father had married twice. There were eight of us. Four boys and four girls.

I was born in 1924, the seventh child. Only my sister Friedel was younger. We lived in Altenwerder, a village a few miles upriver on a branch of the Elbe and within sight of Hamburg.

You might say I was born with a silverspoon in my mouth. Dad was wealthy, very wealthy. He owned a shipyard where he built small vessels such as coastal freighters, launches, and one time a suction dredge, but his main source of income was the salvage of ships from ferryboats to large tankers and passenger liners.

He had done it all by himself. Dad had started his career as bookkeeper on a shipyard, and within a few years at the age of twenty-nine became manager of the place. From then on, he had always managed shipyards until starting his own business.

Once, when I had asked him why he had decided to go his own way, he replied that he had become tired of filling the pockets of strangers. He was an entrepreneur, no doubt about it. None of us children inherited his talent.

Dad was of medium height with blue eyes and thin grey hair. He was badly over-weight due to an excellent appetite. He was generally an easy-going person, but could have a powerful temper if somebody displeased him. He had met my mother when she was a secretary working on a shipyard he had managed at the time. You might say, correctly, that he married his secretary.

While my father's family was Jewish, we could trace it as far back as 1768 in Hamburg, he had taken the Christian faith when he came of age. He never discussed his reason for converting, not even with my mother.

My mother was not born in Germany. She was a South African by birth. My grandfather Heinrich Rehr at the age of nineteen, impoverished and full of the spirit of adventure had left his native village of Moorburg next to Altenwerder, and emigrated in a full-rigged barque, the "Uranus" to Capetown in what was then called the Cape Colony. The trip had taken eight weeks during which a number of passengers had died, and been buried at sea.

He had prospered in Capetown and married my grandmother whose family had originally come from the island of St. Helena, settled in the Cape Colony centuries before, and mixed with both Dutch and French settlers there.

I had thus a diverse ethnic background, perhaps even more than many Americans.

During the Boer war, my grandfather had taken his family including my mother and four aunts back to Germany.

All of my aunts except my mother had a distinct Southern

appearance. They had an olive complexion, jet black hair, and dark brown, almost black eyes. My mother, Mabel was the exception. She had inherited the blond hair of her father, the green eyes of her mother, and had a fair complexion. She was a wonderful person: Easy to please and to forgive, generous to a fault, and a treasure to all who knew her. I was privileged to have her love until she was a hundred years old. Sacred be her memory!

I greatly enjoyed the visits of my aunts Erika and Daisy. They were such friendly ladies, but what was so special about their visits was that the mystique of Africa came with them into our home. The three sisters would speak Afrikaans, a mixture of Dutch and English, among themselves.

Clearly among the scenes of yesterday etched firmly into my heart, I can see the three sisters sitting together on the rattan furniture of our sun parlor having their coffee and cake. The light glints dappled through the stained glass windows. Their soft Southern voices speak in a strange tongue, hinting of places so far, far away.

What they say is total mystery to me. I ask them. They smile. My mother recites a children's verse in Afrikaans. I listen and though I do not understand the words I know their meaning: A mother's love.

My aunt Dolly we saw only on the rarest of occasions. She was what may be described as "Persona non Grata". The reason for this ostracism I learned only many years later from my mother. Aunt Dolly had given birth to a daughter. The problem

was that she was not married. In those days this was the equivalent of a social earthquake.

In later years my mother had a change of heart with respect to aunt Dolly, but it was too late. The finger had written and moved on.

My father's parents had passed away long before I was born. We had little contact with the Jewish side of my family outside of two aunts. One of these, Helene, lived in a house across from us and had coffee and cake with mother every day, but the subject of religion never came up. Indeed, until the Nazis came up with their Aryan mania, I did not even know that some of my relatives were of a different persuasion.

My Aunt Helene was a spinster, who held a dim view of men since being jilted by her fiancé. She was a petite, elderly lady, who dressed herself in a fashion reminiscent of the previous century. Outdoors, she perennially wore a hat which resembled a basket.

She was always kind to us children, but there was a coolness in her or perhaps it was a stern view of children which prevented us from becoming close.

My father's other sister, my Aunt Erna was the opposite. She was very warm and outgoing. I liked her very much even though we did not see that much of her because she lived on a country estate in East Prussia, which was about as far away from us as you could be in Germany. She had been married and called herself Erna Stendal. For some reason we never met her husband.

During the holocaust she had managed to escape from a death train taking her to a concentration camp. If you saw this frail old lady you would never believe her capable of such feat, but she was clever and quick-witted. Some years afterward when I visited her she told me the details of her escape both from the train and near the end of the war from the Russian armies.

Dad also had two older brothers, Eugen and Richard. Both of them as young men had emigrated in 1890 to the United States, and both had vanished there without a trace. All efforts of the family to learn of their fate came to nothing. The sepia photographs of my two uncles in the dusty, old family album look at me from across a century. They lived in Chicago and Milwaukee. That is all I know. The rest is a mystery!

